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ABSTRACT

A recurrent refrain in education is that a restructuring initiative's success hinges on the extent to which the school staff shares goals. An examination of this notion, called the "consensus thesis," is provided in this paper. The report draws on findings taken from a study of two English secondary schools that developed provisions for students with difficulties in learning. For the study, semistructured interviews with cross-sections of the teaching staff were conducted in which teachers were asked to describe and comment on the school's provision for special educational needs. The central question of the paper is whether the consensus thesis is capable of accounting for the processes that were found to be at work in these schools. The report focuses on the educability of pupils, explanations of educational failure and underachievement, the schools' response to student difficulties, teachers' condition of expertise in teaching, and the disparate value system to which teachers appealed. The results suggest that an important property of teachers' speech about schooling is plurality. It seems that in schools where major development initiatives are under way--initiatives that aim to improve provisions for pupils with learning difficulties--that a common feature is the lack of consensus among the teaching staff, which does not support the consensus thesis. (RJM)

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Theorising school development: a dialogical approach

Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting

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Summary

This paper identifies and illustrates a common assumption found in a significant body of recent educational research concerned with restructuring schools to create more inclusive forms of provision; I call this assumption the 'consensus thesis'. Drawing on the findings of a detailed study of two English secondary schools where initiatives were under way to develop provision for students with difficulties in learning (Skidmore, 1998), I question whether the consensus thesis is capable of accounting for the processes which were found to be at work in these schools. The paper concludes by outlining an alternative theoretical framework which offers a more nuanced insight into the complex dynamics of the school development process.

The consensus thesis

There is an extant tradition of educational research, which I have termed the 'organisational paradigm', which is unified by a common conception of the nature of students' difficulties in learning (Skidmore, 1996, p. 39). Research in this tradition employs a model of causation in which difficulties are seen as arising from deficiencies in the ways in which schools are currently organised; concomitantly, the form of intervention proposed is a programme of school restructuring designed to eliminate these organisational deficiencies (Skidmore, 1996, p. 42). A recurrent refrain running through much of the writing within this tradition is an emphasis upon the need for consensus to be established among school staff over shared goals as a precondition for the success of any restructuring initiative. The following citations from the literature provide exemplars of this 'consensus thesis'.

- A 'common mission' embracing 'shared values and beliefs' is a key characteristic of 'effective inclusive schools', which are capable of meeting the needs of all students regardless of disabilities, a characteristic which remains invariant in spite of major differences in cultural settings, according to Rouse & Florian (1996, p. 75).

- The 'building of consensus ... amongst the staff in respect of special needs' is the first of the 'broad political tasks' identified by Dyson and Gains in a recent attempt to redefine the role of the special educational needs co-ordinator (Dyson & Gains, 1995, p. 55).

- '[C]omplete goal certainty and clarity' and 'a strong sense [among staff] of their primary mission' are among the desiderata of the 'Highly Reliable Organisation' which Reynolds posits as a template for producing schools which can reduce the 'elongated "tail" of special needs children that we possess in the UK' (Reynolds, 1995, pp. 123-125).

- The 'development of shared understandings' to increase 'vertical and horizontal social cohesiveness' among staff is a central goal of the 'organic approach to school renewal' evolved by Joyce et al. to 'narrow the achievement gap between the children of the poor and their economically advantaged counterparts' (Joyce, Murphy, Showers, & Murphy, 1991, pp. 182, 190).

- The need for staff to acquire 'a common conceptual framework, knowledge, [and] language' (Villa, 1989, p. 173, cited in Thousand & Villa, 1991, pp. 171-172) is seen as one of the 'critical characteristics of successful heterogeneous public schools' which are capable of 'accommodating for greater student variance' by Thousand & Villa (1991, p. 161).

I have previously argued that the predisposition towards consensus reflected in these examples constitutes a theoretical weakness in the organisational paradigm, which may lead researchers to underestimate the inherent complexity of the school development process (Skidmore, 1996, p. 43). The study to which I have referred has produced evidence which lends support to this view. In each of the schools concerned, a systematic attempt was under way to reorganise provision for students whose learning was giving concern. These attempts were led by a Co-ordinator who was an enthusiast for the 'curricular' (anti-deficit) view of learning difficulties associated with writers working within the organisational paradigm. The Co-ordinators were supported in this task by the endorsement and active involvement of members of the senior management team. Whilst the organisational state prevailing in the two schools differed in various respects, one finding was common across both sites: there was strong evidence of a *lack of consensus* among staff about provision for students with difficulties in learning. Indeed, it was possible to distinguish contrasting discourses of learning difficulty which were current among different constituencies of staff within the same school, and which diverged systematically from one another along a number of dimensions.

About the study

I will illustrate this argument by drawing on the findings of case studies of two English secondary schools, which I will call Downland and Sealey Cove. Downland School, a 13-18 comprehensive of 1300 pupils, is the only secondary school in a prosperous market town in south-west England. It was formed from the merger of separate girls' and boys' schools in 1992. Sealey Cove High School is a mixed 13 -18 comprehensive school of 1150 pupils, maintained by the Local Education Authority, and situated in the suburbs of a large conurbation in the north-east of England. At the time of the study, a new headteacher had been in post for less than 18 months. In both schools, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of teaching staff, in which they were asked to describe and comment on the school's provision for special educational needs. ('Special educational need' is the term used in legislation and guidance in England and Wales to refer to a difficulty in learning [DFE, 1994a; DFE, 1994b].)

In each case, analysis of the interview evidence led to the identification of two discourses of learning difficulty used by different constituencies of staff within the same school. The substantive content of the discourses will be described and interpreted below; here, I will indicate the nature of the constituencies with which they were associated. In Downland, the *discourse of learning potential* was voiced by a constituency of mainly male staff, predominantly from the former boys' school, including the Co-ordinator of learning support, and a number of influential members of the senior management team. It formed the official language of school policy, being found in public documents such as the school brochure, and in working documents such as discussion papers on staff development issues. The *discourse of student difficulties* was associated by contrast with a group of staff from the former girls' school, most of them women, who occupied positions of less status in the new school. These teachers felt themselves to be marginalised and excluded from the formulation of school policy, a perception which was corroborated by the over-representation of staff from the former boys' school in senior and middle management positions following the amalgamation.

In Sealey Cove, a *discourse of curriculum presentation* and a *discourse of pupil ability* were identified. The principal advocate for the discourse of curriculum presentation was the newly-appointed Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator; she received support for her approach from some members of the senior management team, including the new headteacher, and from selected teaching staff who were members of a working group, chaired by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator, whose aim was to bring

about a major change in the organisation of the school's learning support provision, from a model based on the centrality of in-class support teaching to one founded on increased differentiation of the curriculum at the planning stage. The chief spokesman for the opposing position, articulated through the discourse of pupil ability, was an established member of staff in a middle management position (the Head of the Mathematics Department); the same general perspective was shared by a number of other established subject teachers in various areas of the curriculum.

Cross-case comparison revealed a *prima facie* correspondence between the substance of the discourse of learning potential in Downland and the discourse of curriculum presentation in Sealey Cove; likewise, Sealey Cove's discourse of pupil ability and Downland's discourse of student difficulties exhibited much common ground. (As an *aide-mémoire* these correspondences are illustrated in Figure 1.) In what follows, I will discuss and illustrate some of the most important dimensions of the different discourses in turn, before exploring the theoretical implications of these findings for our understanding of the process of school development.

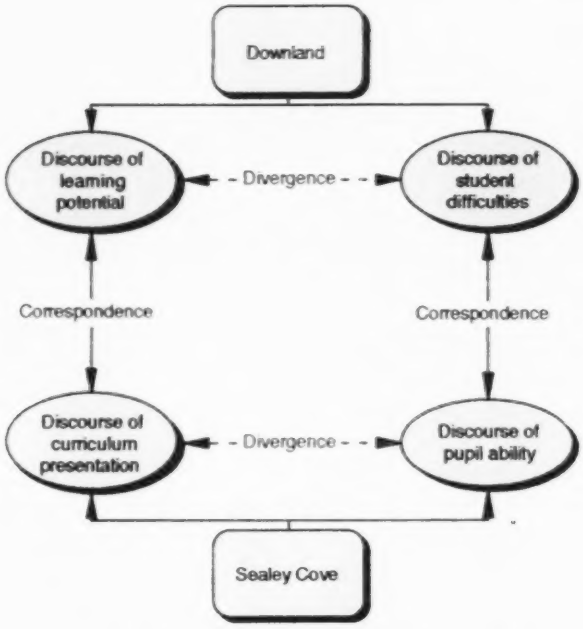

Figure 1: Correspondences between the schools

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Discourses of learning difficulty: dimensions of difference

The educability of pupils

In Sealey Cove, the constituency of teachers using a discourse of curriculum presentation stressed the need to recognise that each pupil's identity as a learner was formed from a unique profile of capabilities and difficulties (rather than being defined categorically, e.g. 'able' vs. 'special educational needs'). Instead of a curriculum predicated upon the assumption of cultural homogeneity, the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator was anxious to ensure that the school would provide an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the manifold talents which pupils bring to schooling by virtue of their diverse cultural backgrounds, for instance by enabling pupils whose first language was not English to study and take qualifications in their home language. In a similar vein, staff who articulated the discourse of learning potential in Downland construed *all* students as possessed of the positive potential to learn; the Teaching and Learning and Co-ordinator in this school strongly rejected practices based on categorical or deficit notions of student identity, such as the policy of identifying a discrete sub-group of 'special needs' students, defined in terms of their weaknesses or deficiencies.

By contrast, teachers who were identified with the discourse of student difficulties in Downland stressed that all students should be treated as individuals, drawing the corollary that some may need differential treatment from that provided for the majority through the mainstream curriculum; they dismissed as naive or idealistic the idea that all students were equally capable of learning successfully in the mainstream curriculum. In Sealey Cove, members of staff who subscribed to the discourse of pupil ability posited the existence of a hierarchy of cognitive ability among pupils; these teachers were heavily committed to the practice of setting by ability, and the provision of an alternative, less academically demanding curriculum for less able students.

Allowing for some differences in the vocabularies employed in the two sites, it can nevertheless be seen that each of these views rests upon one of two underlying assumptions about the educability of pupils, i.e. their ability to benefit from the school's regular educational provision. A distinction can be drawn between, on the one hand, a view of pupils' educability as open-ended, unbounded, and without predetermined limits, which is presupposed in the discourses of learning potential and curriculum presentation; and, on the other hand, a view of pupils' educability as bounded and circumscribed by inherent limitations, arising from a substratum of innate, fixed cognitive ability, which characterises the discourses of student difficulties and pupil ability.

Explanations of educational failure and underachievement

The second dimension of the discourses follows on closely from the preceding concept of educability, *viz.* the 'diagnosis' offered for educational failure. In Downland, one perspective (the discourse of learning potential) traced the source of students' difficulties to deficiencies in the way in which the curriculum was presented to them (rather than their innate weaknesses or lack of ability). Likewise, a strong constituency of staff in Sealey Cove, associated with the discourse of curriculum presentation, ascribed failure in learning to 'insufficient flexibility' in teachers' presentation of the curriculum, repudiating the view that the root of the problem lay in the individual pupil. This explanation was contradicted by teachers employing the discourse of pupil ability, according to which the origin of learning difficulties lay in relative deficits in the cognitive ability of some pupils. For teachers in Downland operating within the discourse of student difficulties, learning difficulties were seen as potentially remediable, but as stemming nevertheless from properties intrinsic to the pupil. Both of these discourses declined to see teachers' presentation of the curriculum as the main source of pupils' difficulties.

Each of these contrasting positions serves the purpose of a working theory, furnishing an explanatory account of the manifest phenomenon of educational failure or underachievement on the part of some pupils, the root cause of which is attributed either to insufficiently responsive teaching, or to some pathology or deficit located within the pupil. But the choice between these two explanatory theories is not merely academic, since they will tend to suggest different strategic courses of action which might be followed; this brings us on to the third, related question of the school's response to the problem of pupils' difficulties in learning.

The organisation of provision: the school's response

The variant forms of discourse deployed in the two schools were also distinguished by the alternative models which could be inferred for the development of school provision in response to pupils' difficulties in learning. In this regard, proponents of the curriculum presentation discourse in Sealey Cove attached priority to working with subject departments to support the differentiation of the curriculum at the planning stage; the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator sought to ensure that the greater part of her own non-contact time, and that of the learning support team, was invested in this

sphere of activity (rather than in providing teaching assistance in the classroom). Though there was a greater reliance on in-class support in Downland, the rationale offered for this within the discourse of learning potential also stressed the end goal of improving the presentation of the curriculum throughout the school through the collective development of pedagogical expertise (as opposed to the aim of remediating students' weaknesses in basic skills).

In contrast, other teachers at Sealey Cove insisted that learning support provision should be organised around the principle of targeted intervention, concentrating on efforts to remediate the shortcomings of individually-identified pupils in basic areas of functioning and performance; for the constituency of staff upholding the discourse of student difficulties in Downland, similar importance was attached to remediating or circumventing the weaknesses of particular students. Both of these viewpoints were opposed to the strategy of providing learning support through generalised initiatives to reform the curriculum.

It can be seen that these outlooks embody two different models of learning support provision, the one aimed at stimulating the reform of curriculum and pedagogy as a school-wide development issue, the other aimed at equipping a minority of identified pupils with the skills required to participate in a fundamentally unreconstructed mainstream curriculum. The issue can be crystallised as the question of whether support for learning is about changing the pupil to suit the curriculum, or adapting the curriculum to the needs of the pupil.

Theory of teaching expertise

Another important faultline along which teachers' discourse was found to diverge within each of the schools was in their conception of expertise in teaching – clearly a central part of teachers' sense of their own professional identity. In Sealey Cove, the group of teachers associated with the discourse of curriculum presentation rejected the idea that learning support provision should be regarded as a form of specialist expertise on a par with subject specialisms; instead, they saw responding to pupils' difficulties as an integral part of the professional expertise which all teachers need to develop, centring on the ability to adapt the presentation of the curriculum by drawing on a variety of teaching methods. Concomitantly, they placed a strong emphasis on the importance of continuing professional development as a means of enhancing the quality of learning experienced by all pupils. This emphasis was shared by teachers working within the discourse of learning potential in Downland. Here, the Teaching and Learning Co-

ordinator, who chaired the school's staff development group, expressed the view that the professional development of teaching staff was central to the improvement of curriculum and pedagogy throughout the school by enhancing the repertoire of methods at teachers' disposal.

The opposing view was equally clear in both schools: for teachers who used the discourse of student difficulties in Downland, and those who held to the discourse of pupil ability in Sealey Cove, expertise in teaching was centrally defined by the possession of specialist subject knowledge. Skills in adapting the curriculum were seen as of secondary importance (indeed, the idea that the class teacher should be responsible for differentiating teaching materials was rejected out of hand by some staff in Sealey Cove); and the value of professional development activities was called into question by a number of established teachers who belonged to these constituencies, who felt that the 'theory' offered to them on such occasions was of little practical use in their work.

These differing views of expertise in teaching would seem to depend upon two discrepant interpretations of the nature of teaching as an activity: a theory of teaching as the transmission of pre-existing content knowledge, on the one hand, and a theory of teaching as an activity aimed at engendering an active process of learning in students, on the other. This distinction corresponds with that drawn by Wells between 'transmission' and 'partnership' models of teaching, a distinction which might be summed up as that between teaching as 'knowing that, and telling' and teaching as 'knowing how, and guiding' (cf. Wells, 1987).

Value commitments

The final dimension along which teachers' discourse diverged concerned the disparate value systems to which they appealed in evaluating provision. For teachers identified with the discourse of learning potential in Downland, for example, the organisation of learning support provision was justified by invoking universal principles such as the concepts of equity of treatment and equality of opportunity. In Sealey Cove, the rationale offered by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator to justify specific development initiatives emphasised the rights of all pupils to participate in a common mainstream curriculum. Both of these outlooks resisted making appeals to the 'interests of the individual' as a justification for treating certain pupils as special cases requiring exceptional treatment.

In contrast, for teachers subscribing to the discourse of student difficulties in Downland, the guiding principle governing the evaluation of provision for special educational needs was the concept of pragmatism (or 'what works' for the individual pupil). A leading spokesperson for the discourse of pupil ability in Sealey Cove invoked a similar notion when he justified the policy of placing pupils in sets according to ability, and providing an alternative curriculum for the less able, saying that this was 'the only way we can deal with it' – portraying the policy as the result of a necessary accommodation to an intractable reality. Both of these constituencies of teachers were hostile to the idea of organising provision in accordance with 'theoretical' or 'idealistic' notions.

This dichotomy between the two forms of discourse is linked with the primary difference of views about pupils' educability. If it is assumed that some pupils' ability to learn is fundamentally circumscribed by a global, determinate intellectual capacity, then a case can be made for differential treatment in accordance with this refractory feature of human nature. On the other hand, if all pupils, given sufficiently responsive teaching, have an open-ended potential for successful learning, then the notion of equity of treatment becomes pertinent, and arrangements which discriminate between pupils on the grounds of ostensibly innate limitations of ability may come to be seen as a denial of their educational rights.

The dimensions of the contrasting discourses of learning difficulty which have been described above are summarised for convenience in the general model presented in Figure 2.

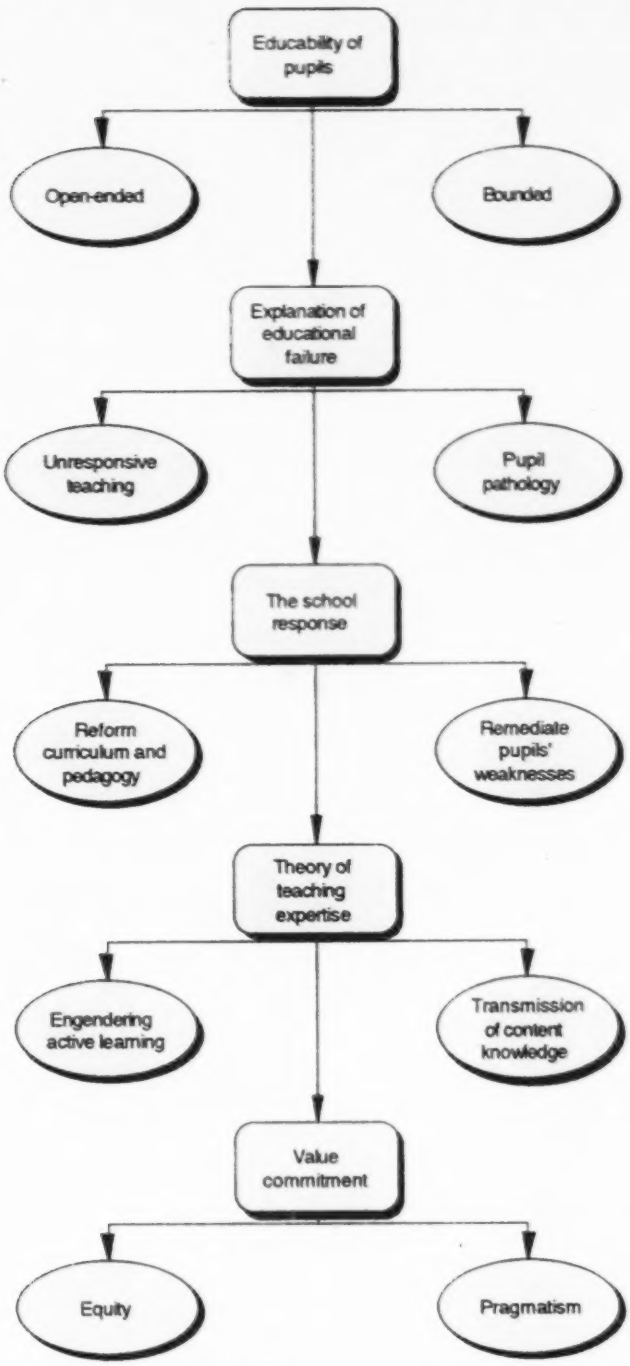

Figure 2: Contrasting discourses of learning difficulty

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The conditions of school development: consensus or dialogue?

The foregoing analysis has identified two variant forms of discourse used by teachers about difficulties in learning; these variants were used by different constituencies of teachers within the same school, a finding which was common across both case study sites. This result suggests that an important property of teachers' speech about schooling is its plurality; in other words, multiple, divergent discourses can be expected to be present within a single institution where major school development initiatives are under way. The evidence of this study, therefore, does not support the consensus thesis, which characterises a substantial body of writing about special needs education within the organisational paradigm, as was illustrated above. On the contrary, a principal finding of this investigation is that, in schools where major development initiatives are under way aimed at improving provision for pupils with difficulties in learning, a common feature is the *lack of consensus* to be found among teaching staff. Rather, what we find is the co-existence of discrete, opposing discourses of learning difficulty. As Figure 2 illustrates, these discourses can be conceptualised as standing in a 'dialogical' relationship towards one another (Bakhtin, 1981); in other words, neither discourse has an existence independently of the other. Instead, they need to be seen as mutually constitutive, formed in the process of 'answering', challenging or responding to one another. However much they may contradict one another, each discourse presupposes the existence of the other.

Furthermore, the study also found that the co-existence of divergent discourses did not preclude the possibility of collaboration between members of the different constituencies upon specific practical initiatives. In Sealey Cove, for instance, the chief representative of the discourse of pupil ability (the Head of Mathematics) was a strong supporter of a reading support programme initiated by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (the leading proponent of the discourse of curriculum presentation); and in Downland, teachers who held conflicting general estimates of the school's learning support provision were nevertheless in agreement upon the importance of a project to develop provision for able pupils. Working compromise of this sort was, however, more widespread and more securely attained in Sealey Cove, where those leading the school reform process held to a perspective of steadily winning over majority support, than in Downland, where there was a self-conscious attempt on the part of the leading members of one constituency (the staff associated with the discourse of learning potential) to impose their outlook as a school-wide orthodoxy, resulting in the marginalisation and alienation of a significant minority of staff (teachers associated with the discourse of student difficulties). This contrast can be illustrated by juxtaposing the

comments of the leading advocates of more inclusive forms of provision in the two schools (emphases added):

> As you know, the key to understanding anything at our school is spotting that it's an uneasy amalgam of two schools with wholly opposite policies and practices. Those philosophies have not entirely gelled anywhere in the school and are especially ungelled in our department. We try to make compromises, etc., but they don't sit easily together. In fact, I think they tend to cancel each other out. In the end, though, it is inevitable that *what I believe will prevail* ... (Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator, Downland School)

> Some of [the staff] are very sympathetic, some of them are naturally antagonistic because of their moral and political viewpoint, some people just despise change ... and a lot of staff, because I'm new, still haven't got a clue where they stand ... I want to move [learning support provision] on again, *dragging most of the staff behind me.* ... (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator, Sealey Cove)

This observation leads to the conjecture that the conditions which are likely to enlist the active participation of the widest possible section of staff in school development initiatives are those which foster a continuous, open dialogue between divergent pedagogical discourses. A premature insistence upon consensus at the outset of the development process is calculated to stifle the creativity and the willingness to experiment among teachers which are necessary to bring about a dynamism in the school's professional culture.

The difference between the alternative strategies may be illuminated by applying the theoretical distinction drawn by Bakhtin between *authoritative discourse* and *internally persuasive discourse* (Bakhtin, 1981). Authoritative discourse is that form of language use which presents itself as unchallengeable orthodoxy, formulating a position which is not open to debate (Bakhtin gives the example of the sacrosanct status attached in religion to scripture – the 'Holy Word'); internally persuasive discourse, by contrast, is language which lays itself open to a continuous process of exchange and negotiation, and which thereby has the potential to become more thoroughly assimilated into the fabric of the individual consciousness – speech which is internalised through dialogue (cf. Dentith, 1995, p. 57). The contrast between the dynamics of development at work in the two schools examined in this study can be conceptualised as the difference between a strategy founded on the attempt by reformers to impose a new, *authoritative* school discourse of inclusion in Downland, as against the strategy used by the advocates of change in Sealey Cove, which sought, through dialogue, to win acceptance for an *internally persuasive* discourse favourable to the development of more inclusive forms of provision.

To summarise, the findings of this inquiry suggest that there are *prima facie* grounds for a critical re-examination of theories of school development which assert that

consensus between staff is a precondition for the success of initiatives aimed at improving provision for students experiencing difficulties in learning. Extending this line of argument, I have been led to propose a counter-conjecture in opposition to the consensus thesis, *viz.* that *an open-ended dialogue between contrasting discourses of teaching and learning is vitally necessary to the fostering of a dynamic school culture*, which will be better adapted to the development of the 'contingently responsive' pedagogy needed in inclusive schools (Skidmore, 1997; Wood & Wood, 1996). If this conjecture is accurate, then an inert state of consensus, far from being a necessary condition for the development of more inclusive forms of provision, is precisely engineered to prevent such development occurring. Instead of the stifling of dissenting views, what is needed is the creation of conditions in schools favourable to a continuous theoretical dialogue between teachers oriented towards the transformation of their own pedagogical practice.

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March, 98

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